The Gnostic Creation Myth

Creation as Raphael imagined it

One of the things that set Gnosticism apart from the other varieties of early Christianity was its astonishing creation myth, an interpretation of the creation myth of Genesis that practically turns that Old Testament text upside down.

Some people find the Gnostic creation myth to be merely bizarre. Others find it to be downright blasphemous. Others find it to be exhilarating and inspiring.

But whatever your opinion of the Gnostics' creation myth ends up being, if you want to understand it on its own terms, it's necessary to be able to at least temporarily see it as the Gnostics themselves saw it: as a story that articulates, and quite possibly even attempts to *explain*, the human condition. Why is the world we live in so full of senseless suffering? What can we do to overcome that absurdity and misery and put our lives to a meaningful use? Is this world where we really belong, or is the quiet despair that forms a constant background to our lives trying to tell us that we really belong somewhere else? And if so, *where* do we actually belong?

The Gnostic creation myth has come down to us in numerous different versions in different Gnostic texts. It's apparent that there was never a single, uniform version of the myth. But the different Gnostic accounts of creation that have survived down to the present day are variations on a common model, not different models altogether.

To very briefly summarize that underlying model: God the Father gave rise to a host of spiritual beings ("aeons") who populated Heaven (which the Gnostics called the Pleroma, "Fullness"), including a divine Mother and Christ. One of the last of these beings to emanate from the Father, Sophia, gave birth to a new being on her own, without the involvement of her partner or the approval of the Father. The being born under such circumstances was nothing like the perfect inhabitants of the Pleroma; instead, he was ignorant and malevolent. This was the demiurge, "craftsman," whom the Gnostics identified with the god of the Old Testament. He created the material world to mirror his own wicked personality and trapped sparks of divinity, fragments of the Pleroma, within humans. It was then up to Christ to awaken humans to their true nature and liberate them from the world.

The retelling below follows the version in the *Secret Book of John*, which is quite representative of the perspective of the classic Gnostic school of thought. The creation stories of the Valentinians, the other early Christian sect or school that can be considered "Gnostic," still adhere to this same basic model, although many of the details differ.

The Creation Myth of the Secret Book of John

In the beginning, there was only the One, the Father, who is

> *illimitable, since there is nothing before it to limit it,*
> *unfathomable, since there is nothing before it to fathom it,*
> *immeasurable, since there was nothing before it to measure it,*
> *invisible, since nothing has seen it,*
> *eternal, since it exists eternally,*
> *unutterable, since nothing could comprehend it to utter it,*
> *unnamable, since there is nothing before it to give it a name.*[1]

The Father was surrounded by luminous spiritual water. He gazed into the water and saw his reflection. His reflection became Barbelo, the Mother, his female counterpart. Barbelo was also called "Pronoia," "Forethought," because she was the first thought of the Father.

Barbelo asked for the Father to grant her Foreknowledge, Incorruptibility, Life Eternal, and Truth. The Father granted her request. Foreknowledge, Incorruptibility, Life Eternal, and Truth came into being and glorified their Father and Mother.

The Father gazed into Barbelo and she conceived by him. She gave birth to a spark of light similar to the Father's light. This was the Son, who was also called "Autogenes," "Self-Generated," since he was at bottom identical with the Father. He was further called "Christ," "a name greater than every name."[2] The Father anointed the Son with his goodness, which passed his perfect goodness onto his Son. The Son glorified his Father and Mother.

Just as Barbelo had asked the One to give her new aeons, the Son asked to be given another: Mind. The Father and Mother agreed. Mind arose and glorified its Father and Mother.

Mind wanted to bring something else into being through the Father's word. Will was born, followed by Word.

The Father made the Son the master of all power and truth. From the Son came the Four Luminaries: Harmozel, Oroiael, Daveithai, and Eleleth. Each came into being with three additional aeons along with its own. The three aeons with Harmozel were Grace, Truth, and Form. The three with Oroiael were Insight, Perception, and Memory. The three with Daveithai were Understanding, Love, and Idea. The three with Eleleth were Perfection, Peace, and Sophia (Wisdom).

Next was "the perfect human," Pigeradamas ("Adam the Stranger," "Holy Adam," or "Old Adam"[3]), who came into being and glorified the Father. He was placed in the aeon of Harmozel. Adam had a son, Seth, who was placed in the aeon of Oroiael. He was set to preside over "the souls of the saints,"[4] those with gnosis, in the aeon of Daveithai. The souls of those who were not saints, but who nevertheless repented eventually, were given a place of their own in the aeon of Eleleth.

Sophia watched these marvelous, radiant beings all around her. A desire to give birth to an aeon of her own arose within her. But she acted on this desire impatiently and impulsively; she didn't bother to involve her divine partner, nor to obtain the consent of the Father. Since she had descended from the Father, she was full of his tremendous power, and she was able to birth a new being that contained some of her divine essence. But because this new entity had been conceived by Sophia alone, it didn't resemble the other immortals. Instead, it was hideous and misshapen. It was like a snake with a lion's head. Its eyes burned like lightning.

In fear and shame, Sophia cast her son out of the divine realm (the Pleroma, "Fullness") in the hope that none of the other inhabitants of that perfect place would see him. To conceal him further, she enveloped him in a shining cloud and placed him on a throne in the middle of it. She named him Yaldabaoth (which probably means "Child of Chaos"[5]), and he has since also been called Sakla, "Fool," and Samael, "Blind God."[6]

Yaldabaoth "mated with the mindlessness in him"[7] and generated twelve archons, demonic beings who would shortly come to rule the earth from the celestial spheres above it: Athoth, Harmas, Kalila-Oumbri, Yabel, Adonaios/Sabaoth, Cain, Abel, Abrisene, Yobel, Armoupieel, Melcheir-Adonein, and Belias.

Because of Yaldabaoth's foolishness, he was wicked and ignorant of his ancestry. He belligerently proclaimed, "I am God and there is no other god beside me." His twelve original archons generated new archons until there were 365 of them – one to rule over each day of the year.

As Sophia's son, Yaldabaoth had the model of the Pleroma within himself. He created the material world based on that model, but because of his ignorance and depravity, it came out all wrong. It was a corrupted and far inferior simulacrum of the divine model.

Sophia watched all of this and was stricken by distress and guilt. She wept and repented for giving birth to such a monstrous entity. The Father, full of perfect love, heard her pleas and promised to forgive her and restore her to her former stature. But first she had to stay in the ninth heaven (the layer of the sky closest to the Pleroma, above Yaldabaoth and the seven archon-populated heavens below him) until she had atoned for her sin and mended her deficiency.

Meanwhile, Yaldabaoth and his archons saw an image of the heavenly Adam from the Father's pristine realm. They didn't know where it came from, but they were enthralled by it. They decided to attempt to create a human being for themselves. But at first their creation lay lifeless on the ground. They couldn't figure out how to animate it.

As they stood around the immobile body puzzling over what to do, the gracious beings of the Pleroma came up with a plan to help the part of Sophia that had become trapped in Yaldabaoth return to her so that she could return to the Pleroma.

Emissaries from the Pleroma appeared to Yaldabaoth and advised him to breathe his spirit into Adam's face, after which, they assured him, the body would awaken and stand up. Yaldabaoth did so, and Sophia's power fluttered out of him and into Adam, bringing the first man to life. Because of Sophia's power within him, he was already wiser, more spiritual, and more intelligent than his creators.

Out of jealousy and resentment, the archons made Adam mortal. They placed him in the Garden of Eden, which they filled with all kinds of sumptuous foods to make him attached to material pleasures and distract him from his true, divine nature.

The archons wanted to possess Adam's divine insight for themselves, so they took it out of Adam and created a new being to house it – Eve. When Adam saw her, he instantly recognized her as his spiritual counterpart. At Christ's urging, Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge (gnosis) and grew in their understanding and their superiority over their creators.

Now boiling with hatred and envy, Yaldabaoth raped Eve and cast her and her mate out of the garden. Two sons were born from this tragic intercourse: Cain and Abel, also called "Yahweh" and "Elohim" (two names for "God" in the Old Testament).

But Adam and Eve later had loving, consensual sex on their own. The product of their union was an enlightened boy whom they named "Seth" after the son of the heavenly Adam.

Yaldabaoth couldn't bear the fact that there were now three beings in his creation who were enlightened and superior to him. He forced Adam, Eve, and Seth to drink the "water of forgetfulness" so that they would lose their gnosis. But the capacity to revive gnosis lay dormant within them; Yaldabaoth wasn't capable of expunging it completely. And their spiritual descendants among humankind remain capable of regaining that saving illumination. All they need is a savior, Christ, to reveal it to them as he did for their first ancestors.[8]

Conclusion

As the title "Secret Book of John" implies, this story was meant to serve as an addition to the Gospel of John – specifically, a prequel. In terms of plot, it sets the stage, and in terms of theology, it provides a context for understanding John's gospel through a Gnostic lens. The same can be said of the relationship between the various versions of the Gnostic creation myth and the shared Christian story of Jesus's life more broadly.

But the creation myth was also a story of central importance to the Gnostics as a standalone tale in its own right. It bound the Gnostic communities together as distinct communities[9] and illustrated some of the key concepts in the Gnostic worldview, such as gnosis and anticosmicism. And as a myth, it did so with a verve and poignancy that bare, conceptual discourse can't muster.

References:

[1] Turner, John D., and Marvin Meyer. 2008. "The Secret Book of John." In *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*. Edited by Marvin Meyer. HarperOne. p. 108-109.

[2] Ibid. p. 112.

[3] Ibid. p. 114, footnote 40.

[4] Ibid. p. 114.

[5] Ibid. p. 116.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid. p. 115.

[8] Ibid. p. 108-132.

[9] Brakke, David. 2010. *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity*. Harvard University Press. p. 41-42.

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Gnosticism Explained strives to provide a reliable, accessible, and engaging introduction to the type of early Christianity known as Gnosticism, with scholarly sources cited throughout.

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